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SOME RESULTS OF A WINTER'S OBSERVATIONS IN ARIZONA

By A. BRAZIER HOWELL

THE SECTION of country contiguous to old Fort Lowell, a few miles east of Tucson, Arizona, is one of peculiar interest to ornithologists, for here much pioneer work was accomplished by certain of the "old guard," such as Major Bendire, and, at a later date, by several of our contemporaries. But little has been done in this region during the winter months, however, and partly for this reason I spent the time from December 7, 1915, until March 25, following, some twelve miles east of Tucson, encamped at an altitude of 2500 feet on Rillito Creek, which flows (occasionally) down an arid valley in a pocket between the Rincon and Santa Catalina mountains. In view of the previous extensive collecting carried on hereabout it is hardly worth while to give an annotated list of the birds encountered by myself, but a few notes concerning certain species may prove of interest.

Due to the situation of our camp, and to the fact that I was unable to absent myself over night, my work was confined to the Lower Sonoran zone. In spite of the fact that I walked as far as seven miles up the canyons from their mouths, at no time was I above the sahuaro association. The height of this zone here, at least 3700 feet, on the sides of the canyons, and higher on the ridges, is caused both by the southern exposure and by the high base level. It was only at the highest point reached that I caught glimpses of such birds as jays and spotted towhees.

Several forms which are not at all uncommon about Tucson seemed to be entirely lacking from our vicinity, notwithstanding the fact that the former place can be only a few feet, possibly seventy-five, lower than the latter, and very similar in character. Yellow-headed Blackbirds (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) were seen about town, but not where we were. Similarly with White-necked Ravens (*Corvus cryptoleucus*), although I did note several large flocks wheeling in seemingly aimless circles far above camp, for hours at a time, which evolutions I judged to be some form of early courtship. In the nearby mesquite

I saw not a single Abert Towhee (*Pipilo aberti*) nor Crissal Thrasher (*Toxostoma crissale*), although these two were among the commonest species near Tucson. Horned larks can be present during the winter months in only very small numbers, for I saw none, although there are good feeding grounds for them. In some ways the winter was a little disappointing to me, for, with the exception of a few common, local species, the bird population consisted almost entirely of forms that also occur plentifully in southern California during this season. No doubt, the seeming paucity of species was in large part due to the fact that I was able to collect only in the cottonwood, mesquite, and mesa-desert associations.

The nature of the country precluded the possibility of my encountering many water birds; an occasional Farallon Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax a. albociliatus*) in one of the small ponds, a few jack snipe (*Gallinago delicata*), and one or two wandering ducks during the rains, being all one could really expect. I was told that the Sealed Quail (*Callipepla s. squamata*) does occur sparingly in this region, but the only species which I saw was the Gambel Quail (*Lophortyx gambeli*). During the winter, all the quail for miles around seem to congregate on one little range of low hills two or three miles long. Here were two very large covies continually persecuted by gunners, cats, coyotes and horned owls. One of the latter came around when a covey was disturbed one afternoon, apparently seeking a light snack during the excitement. About the middle of February the quail begin invading the bottoms, in pairs and small parties. Later in the season they do considerable damage to grain, small, isolated fields of milo and kaffir sometimes being completely destroyed by them.

Of the four doves of the region, only the Western Mourning (*Zenaidura m. marginella*) and Inca (*Scardafella inca*) are resident in any numbers. Only a very few individuals of the hordes of breeding White-wings (*Melopelia asiatica*) remain for the cold weather, and but a single flock of Mexican Ground Doves (*Chaemepelia p. pallescens*) was encountered. As is well known, the Incas prefer the vicinity of towns, but a flock is sometimes encountered on a ranch feeding with the English Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*). The latter, by the way, are much more widely distributed throughout the settled rural districts than they are in southern California.

During my stay the Sharp-shin (*Accipiter velox*), Cooper (*Accipiter cooperi*), Western Redtail (*Buteo b. calurus*), and Desert Sparrow (*Falco s. phalaena*) hawks were the only common, diurnal raptorial birds. Fifteen miles south of Florence, a pair of adult Harris Hawks (*Parabuteo u. harrisi*) was encountered among the sahuaros, but I saw no other dark-colored hawks on the trip. No Mexican Goshawks (*Asturina plagiata*) were noted near camp, but in the forest of giant mesquites twelve miles southwest of Tucson, F. C. Willard and I saw two or three, March 20. To one who is accustomed only to handling dried skins of this species, the bird on the wing is surprisingly large. Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes a. septentrionalis*) arrived from the south March 12. The Audubon Caracara (*Polyborus cheriway*) has not been reported from the state since 1905, and it was with much satisfaction that I secured a fine male of this species, January 6. I wounded another near the same spot, January 31, but it escaped by running through the brush, a statement that will sound absurd to those who have not had the experience of chasing a caracara for a quarter of a mile.

Western Horned Owls (*Bubo v. pallescens*) are more abundant here than I have ever seen them elsewhere. I am sure that the residents of the region must be augmented during the cold weather by numbers which have come down from

the mountains. L. S. Wylie, on the boundary of whose chicken ranch we camped, and to whom I am greatly indebted for innumerable kindnesses, is much bothered by these owls. He states that one will alight on a branch where a chicken is roosting. The latter will awaken and shriek, but is too scared to move. The owl then sidles along and grabs the fowl by the neck. *Bubo* begins to pair here in January, or possibly earlier, and eggs may be expected during the latter part of February. I shot a male bird from a palo verde on March 10, and then discovered the female on a nest nearby. I returned on the 19th and took the female as she left the nest, but was much surprised when a small male flushed not twenty feet away. She evidently did not mourn her first venture very long.

I had always understood that an owl is in the habit of killing its prey by a single bite through the head or neck, and, indeed, I have had indubitable evidence that such is often the case. However, on the first of the year, I flushed an owl from the ground, and discovered that it had abandoned a freshly-killed cottontail. I skinned the latter and found no marks on it except a few claw punctures, which, however, did not seem to penetrate deeply, and which were confined to the trunk of the animal.

I took seven specimens of screech owls from the sahuaro holes. Three of these H. S. Swarth pronounces *cineraceus*, and four *gilmani*, so it is apparent that the former sometimes descends from the mountains during the cold weather and invades the haunts of the latter. During storms those holes in the sahuaros which face towards the wind are half filled with water. This remains for a considerable time, a state of affairs that aids one in the search for screech owls, for, instead of seeking a dry shelter, the birds prefer to stick to the old home, even though such action necessitates their spending the day in the opening of the hole, in full view of passersby. One Pygmy Owl (*Glaucidium g. ridgwayi*) was taken near a spring in the foothills. My eye was first caught by an Audubon Warbler which was fussing around a larger bird, the owl, as if the latter was one of its own immature offspring. As I approached the Pygmy, it flew to a neighboring cottonwood, still followed by the warbler. Due to one of those blunders which occasionally happens, I snapped my auxiliary at it at forty yards. In its more protracted flight this time, its satellite still held place, only desisting from its solicitous attention when I approached to retrieve the owl.

This locality is a favorite one for collecting eggs of the Elf Owl (*Micropallas whitneyi*), and I learn from those with experience that two or even three sets may be expected from a morning's hard work during the proper time of year. It has been supposed that some individuals, at least, of this species pass the winter in their summer home, but I had already suspected, from work done at Pot Holes, California, during the winter of 1913, that such might not be the case. L. M. Huey was with me during a part of my stay at Tucson, and together we spent many hours in examining the sahuaros with the aid of a light ladder. If the Elf Owl had been present, we would hardly have failed to encounter it, but not one was seen or heard.

I had always supposed that the Road-runner (*Geococcyx californianus*) was a harmless bird, with a strong leaning towards the beneficial, but now I am not so sure of this fact. While I was out collecting, these abundant birds would often be seen skulking about with eyes open for any opportunity, and it was always necessary, in such case, to make a dash for a specimen after it was shot. On two occasions a Road-runner darted in and grabbed a bird when I had almost reached it, once hopping two feet in the air to nip a sparrow that had lodged in

the branches of a bush. At another time I was watching a small flock of sparrows as they busily fed in the brush, when I noted a Road-runner stealing up like a cat, taking advantage of every bit of cover. When at the proper distance, it rushed out and sprang into the air at the retreating sparrows. Its expression of keen disappointment, and the way in which it glanced around, as if fearing ridicule of a possible observer, was one of the most comical things I have ever seen. With this taste for small feathered folk, the species, in this locality at least, may work havoc among the breeding quail, as well as among the inexperienced fledglings of the smaller brush-nesters.

Mearns Gilded Flickers (*Colaptes c. mearnsi*) were widely scattered during the first part of December, but on the fifteenth, a cold snap brought them into the cottonwoods. Here they remained, with a few of their red cousins, until the first part of March, at which time they began to pair, and were soon standing guard over favorite sahuaros. They are commoner here at this season than I have elsewhere seen flickers, though rather wary. The plumage of those taken even during December, was considerably worn. These birds can carry a great deal of shot, and when finally secured, are often so covered with blood that one hesitates to take more than the very smallest number necessary. No sapsuckers at all were seen.

With the exception of a couple of undetermined hummers seen at long range, no members of this family were encountered until the Broad-bills (*Cyanthus latirostris*) began to arrive. This was on March 13, after which two or three were almost always to be seen in a small, sheltered patch of mesquite near the mouth of one of the canyons. They favor the top twig of a tree, and are rather conspicuous anyway, but quite shy. Their long tails are especially noticeable whether they are at rest or on the wing, and while in flight, give them a decidedly "bottom-heavy" appearance. Other summer visitants to arrive before I left were the Arkansas Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) March 16, Arizona Hooded Oriole (*Icterus c. nelsoni*) and Lucy Warbler (*Vermivora luciae*) March 17, Arizona Least Vireo (*Vireo b. arizonae*) March 13, and Tree Swallow (*Iridoprocne bicolor*) March 23.

This locality is a little high for Vermilion Flycatchers (*Pyrocephalus r. mexicanus*) during the winter, although at Phoenix, they are rather common during this season. I saw but one near camp until the first week in March, when they began to arrive in some numbers, and soon became abundant. Two specimens of what H. S. Swarth pronounces to be typical *Empidonax griseus* were preserved, taken December 30 and February 22, and several more were noted. Meadowlarks were very abundant, all taken proving to be *Sturnella neglecta*.

One small flock of Pale Goldfinches (*Astragalinus t. pallidus*) was noted during February. The Green-backs (*Astragalinus p. hesperophilus*) were rather uncommon also. I watched a pair engaged in nest-building March 17. Near Tucson, Savannah Sparrows were common in the weed fields, but near camp there were very few suitable places for them. The only one collected proved to be *Passerculus s. nevadensis*. Two birds that were present in some numbers were Brewer and Lincoln sparrows (*Spizella breweri* and *Melospiza l. lincolni*). During the first of March they became very common; in fact almost every little clump of weeds seemed to shelter an individual of the latter species. The only junco encountered was *Junco connectens*, which was not particularly common, a fair-sized flock being met once in a week or ten days. No Sage Sparrows were seen, and I am sorry to say, no Rufous-wings (*Aimophila carpalis*). I read

everything I could find concerning this last species before I left home, and made an especial search for it in its favorite haunts. In habits it is supposed to be very similar to the Western Chipping Sparrow, the two species often occurring in the same flock, and it is supposed to be resident wherever found. However, it was in vain that I searched for hours over the identical hills where many nests are said to have been taken in former years. Collectors who have done recent work in this locality, have either never met with the Rufous-winged Sparrow, or have seen only an occasional individual. It seems that the species must have become exceedingly rare here during the past few years, or that those who reported it as common were laboring under a wrong impression.

A large and interesting series of song sparrows was obtained, *montana* outnumbering *fallax* about two to one. On December 22 I flushed four sparrows from some weeds, while hunting for song sparrows, and instantly realized, as they flew to a tree, that they were something good. As they were wild, I could secure but one, which proved to be a Swamp Sparrow (*Melospiza georgiana*). As far as I can learn, this is the first record for the species west of Texas. Swarth (Pac. Coast Avif. no. 10, 1914, p. 60) speaks of the Arizona Cardinal (*Cardinalis c. superbus*) as "probably" resident, and such must surely be the case, for I found it quite common in suitable places, though shy. During the winter it is seldom found on the floor of the valley, but prefers the mouths of the canyons and the widely-scattered ranches below the foothills, where it may be found in pairs or small parties, sometimes in company with Pyrrhuloxias. During March the Cardinals begin to invade the lowlands, and then occur about the ranch corrals. F. C. Willard informs me, however, that they return to the foothills to breed. That most interesting bird, the Arizona Pyrrhuloxia (*Pyrrhuloxia s. sinuata*) was met in larger numbers than the last, small bands being often encountered both in the bottoms and at the foothill ranches. Sometimes they were quite tame, and at others, exceedingly shy.

On February 9, I was very much surprised to see a Painted Redstart (*Setophaga picta*) at an altitude of 3700 feet in the Catalinas. There is no possibility of mistake, as I am familiar with the bird in life, and it permitted an approach sufficiently close for me to shoot it with the auxiliary. Unfortunately, however, the bird rolled down a high bank and into a swift stream, by which it was carried away before I could get to it. Undoubtedly, this species does not winter on its nesting grounds, even in small numbers, but it is worth noting that it is more hardy than most of the other warblers which we are accustomed to associate almost exclusively with Arizona, as it remains in the mountains in considerable numbers throughout September, when all but a very attenuated rear guard of the others have left for the south.

I feel sure that the prevailing impression is erroneous which regards the Bendire Thrasher (*Toxostoma bendirei*) as a permanent resident of this locality. The section between Tucson and Fort Lowell is a favorite place to collect eggs of the species, but, although I kept careful watch, I saw only one bird (February 1) until March 17, when I secured another, and after which I saw two or three more. F. C. Willard offers evidence corroborative of this view, as he tells me that the species occurs at Tombstone, the elevation of which is about twice that of Tucson, only during the winter. Palmer Thrashers (*Toxostoma c. palmeri*) are most abundant, and breed very early indeed, several nests of young being found the latter part of February. I was considerably surprised at the actions of the hordes of Cactus Wrens (*Helodytes b. couesi*) during the cold weather. In-

stead of comporting themselves in the usual way, they gathered in flocks of from half a dozen to thirty or more individuals, and took to the high cottonwoods, going over the whole top of a tree after the methodical manner of a flock of nut-hatches or bush-tits, even hanging from the branches upside down when need be.

Although not encountered in any numbers, enough Bridled Tits (*Baeolophus wollweberi*) were seen in the valley bottom to point to the probability that the species occurs regularly in such situations. As there seem to be but few state records for the Gadwall (*Chauelasmus streperus*), I record a female shot a few miles east of Phoenix, March 27, when there seemed to be more of the same species present among the large flocks of teal and Shovelers.

Ornithologically as well as otherwise, Arizona is a wonderful state, and a great deal remains to be done among the birds within its boundaries. It is almost a pity that its southern border offers so many inducements to the collector during the spring and summer, the consequence being that other parts of the state, and the south as well during the winter, have rather suffered for lack of systematic field work.

Covina, California, August 28, 1916.

MEETING SPRING HALF WAY

By FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY

III. (*Concluded from page 190*)

AS WE approached Mexico, not only were hackells more frequently seen, but yuccas became more common, sturdy little drum majors, four to twelve feet high, offering good nesting sites to Orioles and Thrashers. Cactus also increased in amount and variety. The beautiful magenta clusters of the ribbed *Cereus* and a small devil's head, with hooked spines, were among them. The thickets were becoming more dense, a veritable jungle of mesquite, huisache, butterfly tree, cactus, and yucca, suggesting the eleven foot rattlers that had been reported with such an air of verity. When Mr. Bailey was tempted in by some rare specimen, the old Texan cried excitedly, "You better come out of that thicket there's buggers there I tell you!" But a long black snake dispatched by the roadside was the worst 'bugger' encountered. Near a pond a plant resembling sunflower was found together with masses of a white nicotine that fairly smelled of tobacco.

Some of the migrants met with were near their southern breeding limits but the Veery seemed decidedly out of place beside Golden-fronted Woodpeckers and the two Doves, the Ground and the White-winged. In the mesquite thickets two of the common notes heard were those of the Golden-fronted Woodpecker and the Wood Pewee. The soft lulling notes of the Wood Pewee to us northerners brought up pictures of cool, high, heavily-roofed northern woods that contrasted strangely enough with these low, hot, thin-leaved mesquite, cactus, and thorn thickets, drolly spoken of as timber; but though the Pewee, which winters from Nicaragua to Colombia and Peru, breeds as far north as southern Canada, some of its numbers do breed as far south as southern Texas.